

The link between empathy and environmental concern

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Findings from a study by researchers from the FRS and Nanyang Technological University suggest that Singaporeans with high levels of empathy are ready to sacrifice their comfort for the common good.



Assoc. Prof. Georgios Christopoulos and Swati Sharma.

Amidst the growing daily concerns regarding climate change, consider a parent who needs to decide whether to switch on the air conditioning to ensure that their child sleeps well. It seems intuitive that a parent with more empathy would prioritise their child's comfort and switch on the air conditioning, downplaying the environmental impacts. Here, empathy generally refers to the ability to understand the emotions and feelings of others.

Counterintuitively, a study led by [Assoc. Prof. George Christopoulos](#) from the Nanyang Business School at the Nanyang Technological University (NTU) and Co-Principal Investigator of the [Interactions with New Technology and Financial Systems](#) module at the Future Resilient Systems (FRS) programme at the Singapore-ETH Centre and co-led by [Swati Sharma](#), PhD Researcher from Nanyang Technological University (NTU) and the [Making Energy Demand More Sustainable and Resilient](#) module at FRS, found the opposite – at least for Singaporeans. People with higher levels of empathy will be more ready to consider the long-term impact of energy consumption and thus be willing to sacrifice their current comfort in favour of a better future for everyone.

This means that Singaporeans with more empathy do not narrowly think only about themselves or even their families, but they also consider the effects for the entire society. Researchers also found that Singaporeans who leaned

towards energy-saving options were of an older age, had higher academic qualifications, and owned public housing.

In this study, the researchers carried out three experimental studies in which they presented participants with diverse and socially complex decision-making scenarios involving conflicting emotions related to participants' immediate kin or co-workers. The research team surveyed 520 resident Singaporeans and the sample included a large majority of homeowners (87%), close to Singapore's national figure (91%).

The findings from this study are important as they can improve existing models of energy-saving behaviour by highlighting that, beyond financial and legislative motives, people have the capacity to prioritise and act on environmental concerns sacrificing the comfort of family and co-workers. Also, empathy can be "induced" and, therefore, can help support other responsible behaviours – such as wearing a face mask in public during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The paper "[Caring for you vs. caring for the planet: Empathic concern and emotions associated with energy-saving preferences in Singapore](#)" was published in *Energy Research & Social Science*.